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GAMING MACHINE WITH REEL STRIPS HAVING AN ORGANIC LIGHT
EMITTING DIODE DISPLAY

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5 FIELD OF THE INVENTION

This invention relates to gaming machines, sometimes referred to as slot machines, and, in particular, to a light emitting diode display in a reel-type gaming machine.

BACKGROUND

10 Organic light emitting diode (OLED) displays are commercially available. An OLED display is a full-color flat-panel display with a level of brightness, wide viewing angle, and sharpness not possible with traditional flat-panel displays. OLEDs are self-luminous, in contrast to liquid crystal displays, and have a distinctly different look. The benefits of OLED displays over LCDs include an unlimited viewing angle, very high
15 contrast, and much higher speed responses. They are extremely thin and lightweight, making them well suited for portable and flexible applications. Some of the many descriptions of OLED displays include U.S. Patent Nos. 5,844,363; 5,952,789; 6,097,147; and 6,483,236; all incorporated herein by reference.

 Conventional reel-type gaming machines include three or more motor-driven
20 reels, each reel having a flexible reel strip around its periphery with 20-25 symbols printed on each reel strip. The reel strips are easily replaceable with ones having different symbols thereon. In a conventional gaming machine, a random outcome is first determined by a microprocessor using a random number generator, and pulses are applied to the stepper motor rotating each reel to cause each reel to stop at the predetermined
25 position. The position of each rotating reel is determined by counting the number of pulses to the stepper motor after a reference position or detecting codes on the reel itself. The symbol combinations across activated pay lines are then evaluated (based upon the

stopped positions of the reels), and the appropriate award is granted to the player in the form of coins or credits.

Reel-type gaming machines are the most popular type of gaming machines, well surpassing the popularity of video-type gaming machines that simulate the rotation of reels on a flat display screen. Manufacturers of gaming machines have added various features to their reel-type gaming machines to increase player interest in the gaming machines.

A reel-type gaming machine is described in U.S. Patent Application Publication U.S. 2003/0060269 A1, filed September 27, 2001, incorporated herein by reference. That application describes a reel-type slot machine, where each reel strip is a flexible OLED display so that each of the symbols is represented by a pattern of energized LEDs on a reel strip. The main purpose of using the OLED reel strip is for changing the symbols for different games with no physical changes to the machine. Once a game starts, the symbols are fixed in position on the rotating reels. The device disclosed in the Publication U.S. 2003/0060269 A1 would be difficult and expensive to implement due to the rotating large electronic display.

What is needed is a further improvement to reel-type gaming machines that can reduce the cost of the machine and add player excitement.

SUMMARY

An OLED display is used in a reel-type gaming machine. In one embodiment, only a section of a reel strip is replaced by an OLED display. The section may only display one symbol. The OLED symbol may be a special symbol used in a high value symbol combination. The symbol may dynamically change to any other image during the game itself or may provide, for example, a celebration display or a highlighted image if the symbol is used in a winning combination. Accordingly, the OLED display adds uniqueness and excitement to the gaming machine with little additional complexity and cost.

In another embodiment, at least a visible portion of a reel's circumference is provided with an OLED display, and the reels do not move. The LEDs on the OLED

display are energized in such a way (scrolled) as to simulate the movement of symbols on a reel rotated by a motor. Such a gaming machine is a hybrid between a pure video gaming machine and a motor-driven reel-type machine. The reels appear to a player to be actual motor-driven reels, and the electronic control of the LEDs to simulate the rotation may be indistinguishable from actual reel rotation. The gaming machine may be manufactured inexpensively since there is no requirement for stepper motors and the controls for operating the stepper motors. Simulated sounds may be generated to simulate the sounds of reels starting and stopping.

In one embodiment, conventional rotating reels, or any reel incorporating an OLED, are viewable behind a transparent display window. The display window is a transparent electronic display that can be controlled to display any opaque or translucent image. In one embodiment, the display window is a liquid crystal display (LCD). The LCD may also be a touch screen, and icons may be displayed superimposed in front of the reel symbols so that players can effectively touch the symbols on the reels to perform certain functions. Such functions may be to hold a reel (or an OLED symbol) during the next game. The display window may be used to highlight any winning combinations of symbols on the reels or convey any other information. The LCD may provide a celebration type of screen, and may even provide the controls for the player to operate a game, such as spin the reels, bet max, etc.

In another embodiment, the display window is a transparent touch screen but cannot display images.

In another embodiment, the display glass in areas other than the transparent openings for viewing the reels may be an OLED display, and LCD, or other type of display to enable the display glass to display any programmed images.

Many other embodiments may be made using the above-identified inventions.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Fig. 1 is a front view of a reel-type gaming machine that may incorporate the present invention.

Fig. 2 is a perspective view of three motor-driven reels in the gaming machine of Fig. 1, wherein one or more symbols on a reel strip around each reel is created by an OLED display.

Fig. 3 is a side view of a reel frame, around which the reel strip is adhered, showing a control cable to the OLED display and to an electrical connector slip ring for maintaining electrical contact with a controller as the reel rotates about an axis.

Fig. 4 is a perspective view of three stationary reels, each including an OLED display that simulates the movement of symbols on a rotating reel.

Figs. 5, 6, and 7 illustrate the physical reel symbols with superimposed images created by a transparent display screen in front of the reels.

Fig. 8 is a block diagram of certain functional blocks in a gaming machine incorporating the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

Fig. 1 is a front view of a gaming machine that incorporates the present invention. Many other types of gaming machine designs may also be used with the inventions.

A player deposits a coin into coin slot 1 to obtain a playing credit. Other devices for generating playing credits include bill acceptors, ticket slots, card slots, and any other known device. A starting handle 2 may be pulled by the player to start the game. Displays 3 display any useful information, such as the amount of the last win, the total credits, and the number of coins deposited.

Player control buttons 4 perform various functions such as pay out (coins), bet, max bet, and start (spin reels). Reel strips 5, 6, and 7 are revealed through transparent windows 8, 9, and 10, respectively.

A coin tray 11 receives coins paid out by the gaming machine.

Top display glass 14 surrounds the transparent windows 8, 9, and 10 and displays any information or design. Bottom display glass 16 typically displays the logo of the game.

By betting a sufficient number of credits, three pay lines A, B, and C may be activated, where designated symbol combinations across an activated pay line pay predetermined awards to the player. Conventional aspects of reel-type gaming machines are extremely well known and need not be described herein.

5 Fig. 2 is a perspective view of three reels with reel strips 5, 6, and 7 around the periphery of the reels. A reel is formed of a light plastic frame 14 (Fig. 3). Stepper motors 22, 23, and 24 rotate a predetermined amount with each pulse applied to the stepper motor. As in a typical gaming machine, the final positions of the three reels are predetermined by a random number generator within the gaming machine. The required
10 number of pulses to rotate the reels to their predetermined positions is determined by a microprocessor, and the pulses are applied to each stepper motor. The final positions of each reel represent displayed symbols in windows 8, 9 and 10. The appropriate award for any winning symbol combination across a pay line is then paid to the player.

 To add excitement to the game and to distinguish the gaming machine from other
15 reel-type gaming machines, one or more of the symbols on the reel strip for one or more of the reels is a color OLED display 26. The particular symbol displayed by the OLED display 26 in Fig. 2 is the symbol 7. An OLED display controller selectively provides energization signals to X and Y coordinates in an LED array to create a bright image in any color. The control of an OLED display and the construction of a flexible OLED
20 display necessary to form any symbol are well known in the field of OLED display technology.

 In Fig. 3, the flexible OLED display 26 portion attached to the reel frame 14 is shown having an electrical cable 30 connected to a slip connector 32, which includes electrical contacts that rotate with the shaft of the stepper motor and stationary contacts
25 that make electrical contact to corresponding rotating contacts to provide uninterrupted electrical contact as the reels are rotating. Such rotatable contacts are well known. Examples of such contacts include U.S. Patent Nos. 6,331,117 and 4,583,798, incorporated herein by reference. Cable 30 includes power and signal wires. The resolution (LEDs per unit length) can be virtually any number, such as five per
30 centimeter. Decoding circuitry may be fixed on the reel frame 14 so that serial or parallel

encoded signals through cable 30 can be decoded by circuitry proximate to display 26 to energize any number of LEDs in display 26.

5 The control of display 26 is performed in software in conjunction with known display controller technology, which stores a pattern of bits in a memory corresponding to the image to be displayed. An energization scheme of display 26 may be a raster scan that selectively energizes the LEDs by row and column at a rapid rate.

As the reels are spinning, the player is attracted by the illuminated symbols on the OLED displays 26. When the reels stop spinning, the OLED displays 26 may change its presentation depending upon the outcome of the game, such as if the special symbols
10 displayed by OLED displays 26 are involved in a winning combination. There may be one or more symbols displayed by an OLED display 26 on a reel strip. Display types other than an OLED may also be used.

In one embodiment, shown in Fig. 4, a flexible OLED display 34, 35, 36 forms a visible portion of each stationary reel. The portions 37, 38, and 39 of the reels are not
15 visible to the player and may even be deleted.

When a player presses the start button 4 or pulls lever 3, the symbols on the OLED displays 34, 35, and 36 scroll down (or up), giving the illusion to a player that reels are actually spinning. Scrolling of an LED display is well known and may involve simply shifting prestored symbol-forming bits in a video memory as is done in a video
20 gaming machine.

Accordingly, the player is provided the excitement of a bright multi-colored display, and the gaming machine manufacturer can produce an inexpensive gaming machine without moving parts, such as stepper motors.

When the stationary reels appear to stop, the OLED symbols may change into any
25 form to highlight a symbol, or to convey information, or to show a celebratory display, or to identify the winning symbol combination, etc. A displayed symbol can randomly turn into any other symbol, such as a wild card symbol with added functions. Virtually anything performed in conventional video-type gaming machines may be performed on the OLED displays 34, 35, and 36. In addition, any bonus game can be easily performed

where the symbols on displays 34, 35, and 36 are changed for the bonus game as a result of a special outcome of the main game. Display types other than an OLED may also be used.

Referring back to Fig. 1, display windows 8, 9, and 10 may be a transparent display screen that can display any image in the foreground of the reel strips. The reel strips may be conventional, or may be any of the reel strips described with respect to Figs. 2 and 4. A suitable display window may be a liquid crystal display, which can selectively produce clear pixels or colored pixels, where red, green, and blue components of a backlight are selectively blocked by the pixels in the liquid crystal display. The display need not be electronic but may use reflection to present an image in front of the reels.

Fig. 5 illustrates how the LCD windows 8, 9, 10 can be controlled to form a frame 40 around each symbol in a winning combination to highlight the combination, assuming two oranges and a cherry result in an award to the player.

Fig. 6 illustrates how LCD windows 8, 9, and 10 can be controlled to highlight the pay line 42 that has a winning symbol combination across it.

The transparent display windows 8, 9, and 10 can additionally be a touch screen, where the X-Y position of a changed capacitance caused by a player's fingertip touching the screen is sensed. The X-Y position is cross-referenced with a function to be performed. The touch screen may be used to display information to the player or to designate a selection by the player. In Fig. 7, the gaming machine is the type that allows the player to hold a reel stationary for a next game if the player believes the displayed symbols are advantageous. A frame 44 (or other highlighting image) may appear around a reel or symbol that has been held by the player touching the screen in front of that reel. Any information or icons may be displayed by the windows 8, 9, and 10 in front of the reels. In another example, question marks may appear on windows 8, 9, and 10 asking the player to make a selection by touching one or more of the question marks to select a reel or symbol.

Control of an LCD display is well known and need not be described herein. The light that illuminates the reels may be the backlight for the LCD. Alternatively,

additional backlighting sources may be optically coupled to the edges of the LCD display window. Such light sources may be red, green, and blue LEDs or a white light. Red, green, and blue pixels in the LCD display window are energized to display any symbol or any information on windows 8, 9, and 10. The windows 8, 9, and 10 can be a single display panel or separate display panels. Other transparent display windows may be used instead of an LCD.

In another embodiment, display windows 8, 9, and 10 are transparent touch screens that do not have the capability to display images. Such touch screens are well known and include capacitive, piezoelectric, and other types of touch screens. One type of capacitive touch screen is described in U.S. Patent No. 5,579,036, incorporated herein by reference. A player may "touch" a reel or symbol to hold the reel or symbol, or to otherwise make a selection, by touching an area of the touch screen corresponding to the selection.

In another embodiment, any portion of the top display glass 14 or the bottom display glass 16, or both, may be OLED displays that can be controlled to display any image. As such, the display glass does not need to be replaced if the machine is configured to play a different game. Control of OLEDs is well known. The image displayed can be static to display information for a particular game or may change depending on the status of the game being played. For example, the display glass may have an attract mode, a play mode, and a celebration mode for a player win. The display glass may also be a LCD or any other type of programmable display.

Recently, flat panel displays with pixels that hold their on or off states even after power has been removed have become commercially available. Therefore, the programmable display glass may be programmed to display anything without further processing by the gaming machine's microcomputer until it is time to change the display. Such a display is sometimes referred to as electronic paper. Reconfiguring the gaming machine for a new game would require a one time reprogramming of the display glass. This display glass in combination with the OLED reels and other inventions described herein enable a gaming machine owner to change the game played and the appearance of the gaming machine with only a software change for the displays and a game program

change. This reconfiguration may be done remotely via a server or performed at the gaming machine.

Fig. 8 illustrates basic circuit blocks in a suitable gaming device incorporating the present invention. A control unit (CPU 60) runs a gaming program stored in a program ROM 63. A coin/bill/credit detector 61 enables the CPU 60 to initiate a next game. A pay table ROM 64 detects the outcome of the game and identifies awards to be paid to the player. A payout device 62 pays out an award to the player in the form of coins upon termination of the game or upon the player cashing out. The payout device 62 may instead generate a payout in the form of a coded paper ticket, credits on a smart card or magnetic strip card, or in any other form. A display controller 65 receives commands from the CPU 60 and generates signals for the various displays 66, including the LCD and OLED displays. Player commands may be input through the buttons or touch screen into the CPU 60.

Each feature described herein can be used in a gaming machine by itself or in combination with the other features. Having described the invention in detail, those skilled in the art will appreciate that, given the present disclosure, modifications may be made to the invention without departing from the spirit of the inventive concepts described herein. Therefore, it is not intended that the scope of the invention be limited to the specific embodiments illustrated and described.